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Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh

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## THE BLOODY PATH OF CHANGE: THE CASE OF POST-SOVIET TAJIKISTAN

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh

Following the breakup of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century, the republics of Turkistan and Eastern Bukhara sought their autonomy under two banners: Pan-Turkism, designed by nationalist intellectuals in the republic of Turkistan, and Pan-Islamism, which grew out of the ambitions of religious elements organized, for the most part, in the Emirate of Bukhara. These two "isms," each with its own demands, joined forces to battle the influence of Russian colonizers and the Red Army. The nationalist and religious intellectuals who created these concepts were later purged by the Soviet system, a regime that proved to be even more devastating than Tsarist rule.<sup>1</sup> In post-Soviet Tajikistan today, in an attempt to fill the political vacuum created by the breakup of the Soviet Union, the nationalist—pan-Tajik—and religious elements in society have once again united in opposition to 70 years of socialist rule. The purge of nationalist and religious elements in society has been reactivated, this time by native Tajiks who ascended the echelons of power using the structure of the former Soviet system.

Since Tajikistan declared its independence in September 1991, it has been faced with the task of building a state under difficult conditions: a combination of widespread poverty, ambitious but inexperienced politicians, regional rivalries born out of the divide-and-rule policy of Moscow, and the intervention of outside forces taking advantage of the chaos to fortify their national interests. The result has been disastrous. More people were killed in Tajikistan in six months of fighting between October 1992 and March 1993 than in any other conflict in the former Soviet Union, including the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Although the official number released by the government brings the toll to 25,000 dead, opposition parties and associations believe it to be much higher.<sup>2</sup> The opposition—a combination of members of the Democratic Party, the Islamic Party, Rastokhez, and La'le Badakhshon—believes that 40,000 to 80,000 were killed. Out of five and one-half million inhabitants, the war internally displaced ten percent of the population, sent 60,000 refugees to Afghanistan,

1 Edward Allworth, *Central Asia, 120 years of Russian Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989); Seymour Becker, *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Islam and the Russian Empire* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1988).

2 The conservative Russian newspaper *Den'* puts the number at 100,000 (no. 52, December 27-31, 1992, p. 1).





and cost an already devastated economy 200 billion rubles.<sup>3</sup>

The conflict in Tajikistan has been described as (1) a political conflict between supporters of reform in Tajikistan and the conservative old guard holding on to its power; (2) a conflict between people of different regions of origin (i.e., between a politically privileged north and an economically poor south); and (3) a religious confrontation between forces seeking to establish an Islamic state and Communist powers. The conflict in Tajikistan, meanwhile, does encompass some elements of all three disputes. Given the political inexperience of both the leadership and the opposition and the unwillingness to seek compromise, together with the maneuvering of outside forces to use internal strife to their advantage, political and regional differences led to a full-scale civil war.

After examining the conflict in each of the three outlined frameworks, it shall be argued that the disrupting factor in Tajikistan is, in the end, the opposition between national forces that seek to create an independent Tajik State and a *nomenklatura* of former elites that is unwilling to relinquish its positions and that opposes the very concept of change, including the prospect of full sovereignty in the future. Furthermore, the powers that seek to hold together the new nation state of Tajikistan are in fact weaker and more selective than those pulling it apart. The conflict in Tajikistan, although caused by internal fragmentation, ultimately excuses stepped-up dependence on Russia, on the one hand, and on Uzbekistan, the new superpower of Central Asia, on the other. Thus, the issue at stake is nothing less than the total loss of newly-found independence and future instability in the region as old and new countries engage in a power struggle.

Tajikistan was not able to take full advantage of its unexpected sovereignty in the first place, due to the legacy of a policy which made the infrastructure completely dependent on a center outside the former republic. Indeed, the experiment with national independence was doomed to failure from its early days: the legacy of a socialist past plagued an independent future.

## Background

One explanation for the primary cause of the conflict may be that the ruling classes did not accept the concept of independence, descending unexpectedly from the center, and fearing to lose their positions, revived old regional animosities and fueled the fear of fundamentalism to curb reform-minded people.

Three distinct periods can be delineated in the chronology of events: The first extends from the introduction of *perestroika* in Tajikistan in late 1989 to February 1990, during which time a number of academicians and nationalist intellectuals founded the national front of Tajikistan, Rastokhez (Resurrection), following the model provided by the Sajudis National Front of Lithuania. The campaign of Rastokhez began primarily with cultural demands: adoption of Tajik as state language, the return to the traditional Arabic-Persian alphabet, the replacement of city and street names with their pre-Soviet appellations or with new titles from Tajik history, the revival of the Islamic cultural heritage, and pressuring the Uzbek government to grant greater cultural autonomy to Tajiks living in their republic. Rastokhez then made increased social and economic demands, among which were the reversal of mono-culture, the improvement of the environment, and the preparation of local specialists in different fields. Rastokhez laid the ground for future parties and organizations that collectively sought the complete political and economic independence of Tajikistan. However, two weeks before parliamentary elections in February 1990, violent riots in Dushanbe resulted in 26 killed and more than 100 injured.<sup>4</sup> In a negative campaign in the republican newspaper, the government blamed Rastokhez for the uprising and began criminal proceedings against its leaders.<sup>5</sup> At the ensuing elections, a largely Communist parliament was elected, the majority of seats going to former Communist representatives.

Government pressure on democratic movements, however, backfired and in the second period, from February 1990 to October 1992, a number of parties and movements became actively involved in Tajik politics. Using sympathetic people's representatives in the Supreme Soviet for influence

<sup>3</sup> Figure quoted by Prime Minister Abdumalik Abdullojonov in TASS-KHOVAR, January 11, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Full account given in "Fevral'skii bunt," *Ekspress Khronika*, no. 6, February 1-8, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> A subsequent report by the Commission of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan, as well as a report published by Helsinki Watch claimed that Rastokhez was not guilty. See *Conflict in the Soviet Union: Tadzhikistan*, A Helsinki Watch Report, July 1991.



and mobilizing the mostly rural population through massive rallies and demonstrations, the Democratic Party, the Islamic Revivalist Party, the La'le Badakhshon and dozens of other religious, cultural and political organizations were officially registered between 1990 and 1991. Although they all favored democratic reforms and a gradual transition to a market economy, each had a specific program of goals, rules and regulations and each attracted members from different walks of life.<sup>6</sup> Collectively, they began publicly to demand increased reforms, complete independence, and even the resignation of the parliament. The united opposition, moreover, nominated a candidate to the presidential elections in 1991, Davlat Khudonazarov, who received 30 percent of the votes.<sup>7</sup> The split in society divided Dushanbe physically in the spring and summer of 1992, when two main squares of the capital became centers for extended vigils and demonstrations between supporters of the opposition gathered at Shohada (Martyrs) Square and those of the government temporary living at Ozodi (Liberty) Square. Demonstrators at both squares were simultaneously armed in the beginning of May, apparently from weapons provided by the Russian Army stationed in Dushanbe, the presidential guard, as well as by Mujaheddin groups from Afghanistan. Following a brief armed confrontation between the two contingents, then-president Rahmon Nabiev acquiesced to a National Reconciliation Government where the opposition obtained eight key portfolios.

But the victory of so-called democratic forces was not long-lived. The third period, from November 1992 to the present, has witnessed the unconditional victory of the former Communist government. In late November 1992, the parliament, meeting outside of the capital Dushanbe, staged a strong comeback, rejected all the candidates of the opposition, and designed a government made up mostly of people from the Leninobod Province and the city of Kulob.<sup>8</sup> It then moved to consolidate its rule by outlawing all political parties and associations and closing down opposition

newspapers such as *Charoghi Ruz*, *Adolat*, *Haft Ganj* and *Najat*. The Prosecutor General issued criminal proceedings against the former spiritual director, Qozi Akbar Turajonzoda, Shodmon Yusuf, head of the Democratic Party, Davlat Usmon the former vice premier and deputy head of the Islamic Revivalist Party as well as Davlat Khudonazarov, labeling them "enemies of the people." Meanwhile, the civil war was especially violent due to the wide availability of weapons, the participation of criminal bands freed from local prisons, and the activities of the Popular Front, headed by Sangak Safarov, a man who served 23 years in prison,<sup>9</sup> which sided with the government. Houses were raided and burned and opposition sympathizers, especially people from the regions of Garm and Badakhshon, were summarily killed or imprisoned.<sup>10</sup>

Since March 1993, however, the situation in Dushanbe has somewhat normalized as local operations—except by opposition groups or individuals—have been resumed. International organizations such as the United Nations, UNICEF, UNHCR and the Red Cross are currently operating in cities across the war-torn republic and the new government is trying to repair the damage through emergency legislature and plans. Except for sporadic skirmishes at the Tajik/Afghan border and in the Autonomous Republic of Mountainous Badakhshon, stability seems to be the order of the day, at least on the surface.

## A Political Conflict

Soviet rule in Tajikistan could not have so effectively achieved its goals had it not been for *koreni-zatsiya*, the use of local cadres in implementing policies. Bolshevism and the concept of "Eastern despotism" proved compatible: Bolshevik power was accepted by the Central Asian republics, not as an ideal, but because it reinforced the method of iron rule by a strong hand. Leaders clung to power, and people adjusted to being ruled. Ironically, Gorbachev's policy of "openness" or *glasnost* also became another platform for forcing ideals and ideas.

6 See the exposé of all parties and associations in Shahrbanou Tadjibakhsh, "The Tajik Spring of 1992," *Central Asian Monitor*, no. 2 (1993), pp. 21-29.

7 Davlat Khudonazarov lost the elections to Rahmon Nabiev, the former Secretary of the Communist Party who had been dismissed by Gorbachev. The opposition protested that the elections had been rigged.

8 The Parliamentary Republic of Tajikistan is now headed by Speaker of the Parliament Emomali Rahmonov (from Kulob) and Prime Minister Abdumalik Abdullojonov (from Khujand).

9 See the profile of Sangak Safarov in "Blef tadzhikskogo Robin Guda," *Moskovskie Novosti*, no. 13, March 28, 1993, p. 11. Also, "Sangak Safarov—Tadzhikskii Chapayev," *Megapolis Ekspres*, February 24, 1993, p. 8.

10 *Tadzhikistan: Hidden Terror, Political Killings, "Disappearances" and Torture Since December 1992*, Amnesty International Report, May 1993; also "Tajikistan," Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1992, Department of State for Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, February 1993, pp. 923-31; and press articles, including "Chasse aux Opposants a Doushanbe," *Le Monde*, December 18, 1992, p. 4.



A genuine multi-party system and public opinion seemed to have been born in 1989, but again using the same structures of organization and power distribution created by Soviet rule.

With the introduction of *glasnost* two forces clashed in Tajikistan, each lacking political knowledge but both organized, ambitious and uncompromising: conservative forces, powerful and relatively experienced at ruling, albeit by taking direct orders from Moscow, and forces demanding change, a coalition of democrats, nationalists, Islamists and inhabitants of regions seldom represented in the government.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas the leadership continued to stress the need for a unified Commonwealth of Independent States and the full support of Russia on which it was clearly dependent, opposition forces rallied for the ratification of laws on reform and independence in the parliament and the revival of national culture and language. The opposition exerted pressure on the government through massive demonstrations, by mobilizing dissatisfied people and by uniting all alternative parties and associations. At desperate moments, it even resorted to unconstitutional methods such as holding hostages, threatening the Russian population in Dushanbe and demanding at gunpoint the resignation of the president.<sup>12</sup> The government, meanwhile, continued to enjoy the full support of the Communist parliament elected before the August 1991 coup in Moscow, declared itself a "democratically elected constitutional government," and enjoyed the backing of Russia, Uzbekistan, and a number of other countries. Thus, the political conflict sided with supporters of the old order against those who advocated change.

## A Conflict of Regional Differences

The political conflict, meanwhile, was both an excuse for revived regional confrontations and the offspring of a geographically fragmented Tajikistan. Regional differences were both the cause and the consequence of political disagreements.<sup>13</sup> Thus,

Communist, Islamic, nationalist or democratic values were used as labels in the legitimization of different regional clashes. Strong regional rivalries, which had been encouraged by Moscow's policy of divide-and-rule in Central Asia since 1924, determine today's political loyalties. Teresa Rakowska Harmstone's 1970 comparison of Russian and Tajik membership in the government and Party between 1946 and 1956<sup>14</sup> amply demonstrated the perils of *korenizatsiya*, but it only hinted at the rise of another more native and more destructive effect of Soviet rule: *Mahalgaroi*, translated as "regionalism" or "localism," which even outlasted the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Harmstone's data demonstrated that most of the "Asian political elite" were born near or in Leninobod (now Khujand) and that very few came from Chirchik or Pamir.<sup>16</sup>

Since the late 1940s, Moscow has systematically chosen the leadership of the Party and the state from the Leninobod Province, and more specifically from its capital Khujand. Moscow considered the Leninobodis to be the most advanced, educated and urban people of Tajikistan, as well as the most loyal to the Communist Party. Leninobod shares borders with Uzbekistan and the population, a mix of Tajiks and Uzbeks, maintains close ties with its neighbors.

It was therefore natural that regions which were economically and politically under-represented in the government (south, central and eastern Tajikistan, including Dushanbe and the Autonomous Republic of Mountainous Badakhshan) should welcome the ideals of *perestroika* and fight for reform in politics and society. The northern Leninobod province, meanwhile, used political influence over its only client in the south, the city of Kulob, to gather support for the *ancien régime*. Kulob was among the poorest regions of Tajikistan, opposed entry into a market economy, and had a number of conservative politicians, heads of executive committees and kolkhoz directors who had been given increased autonomy over their localities. Since power and privilege had been traditionally distributed on the basis of regional loyalties,

11 To quote Olivier Roy at the U.S. Institute of Peace, February 24, 1993: "The opposition united the losers... and they lost."

12 The forced resignation of the president was brought about by an independent group calling itself the "Young People of Dushanbe," which was a front for more radical members of the opposition.

13 Shahrbanou Tadjibakhsh, "Causes and Consequences of the Civil War," *Central Asian Monitor*, no. 1 (1993), pp. 10-14. Also "Tajikistan," Staff Report of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, December 1992, pp. 222-31.

14 Teresa Rakowska Harmstone, *Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 151.

15 For a division of Tajiks into three major "clans," see Timur Kadyr, "Powder Keg Under the Roof of the World," *Megapolis-Express*, September 16, 1992, p. 20, as translated in CDSP, vol. XLIV, no. 37 (1992), p. 10. Tajik intellectuals and politicians repeatedly tried to undermine the importance of localism, especially before the war. See Asliddin Sohbnazarov, "Nest bod Mahalgaroi! Poianda Bod Vahdati Milli!" (Down With Localism! Long Live Unification of the Nation!), *Tojikiston*, July 3, 1992, p. 5.

16 Rakowska Harmstone, p. 15.



Kulob, locked in a clientele relationship with Khujand, seldom sought representation in the central government. On the other hand, the less privileged regions that became most active in the name of the opposition were areas that had suffered the most under Communism. Activists from two of the foremost strongholds of the opposition, the region of Matcho in the north and Qurghon-Teppa in the south, were originally mountain peoples who had been forcibly settled in plains and engaged in cotton agriculture.

Such political loyalties based on regional differences were manifested in the elections for the presidency in 1991, where the candidate for the united opposition received the majority of the vote in Badakhshon, Qurghon-Teppa, Komsomolobod, Gharm and Dushanbe, regions heavily punished and damaged later during the fighting.<sup>17</sup>

## Religious Conflict: A "Fundamentalist" Tajikistan?

In both the Western and Soviet mass media, the conflict was portrayed primarily as one between "Communists" and "Islamists." Although a thorough analysis of the role of political Islam has been done elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> the following arguments attempt to show that fears of a "fundamentalist threat" in Tajikistan were unjustified, primarily an excuse to crush the opposition and gather international support.

The political use of the word "fundamentalism" in Tajikistan originated when the Communist Party, rejuvenated after a short setback during the aftermath of the August 1991 coup, began advertising itself as the savior of the people of Tajikistan against "Islamic fundamentalists." The word "fundamentalism" appeared in government newspapers and nationalist demands were described as subversive acts carried out by Islamists interested in creating an Islamic state.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, the principal incentive for the participation of Muslims in political events in Tajikistan was a response to the salutary policies instituted by Gorbachev. In a deeply religious society, Bolsheviks had closed mosques, burned religious books, and banned religious holidays and traditions such as circumcision and marriage. Central Asian Muslims therefore welcomed Gorbachev's relaxation of religious policies. Like a coil springing back, religion was revived with great fervor. Islam did indeed take on an anti-Communist character but that did not necessarily mean that demands for an Islamic state would be accepted by all recently reawakened Muslims.

Yet, during the civil war, the government accused the Qoziiot, the highest spiritual administrative body in Tajikistan, of metamorphosing into a paramilitary organization and a center of anti-government propaganda "with the help of foreign dollars."<sup>20</sup> Government officials specifically criticized Iran and Saudi Arabia, which supposedly had been preparing Islamic forces to launch a coup since 1978.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, Shiite Iran is much too cautious and too preoccupied with its own internal socio-economic problems to play a decisive role in the events of Sunni Tajikistan. Iran is vying for influence among all Muslims of Central Asia, and therefore will not take sides with a small minority: it will not encourage nationalism on a small scale, especially given the presence of a large number of minorities on its own territory. In fact, apart from verbal condemnation of the "massacre of Muslims" in Tajikistan,<sup>22</sup> Iran did not openly support the opposition during the civil war. Iran, which does not share a border with Tajikistan, is especially interested in establishing commercial and cultural relations with Tajikistan,<sup>23</sup> and even if it were to take measures to curb the influence of Turkey in Central Asia, it does not prescribe an Islamic revolution on its own model, at least officially.<sup>24</sup>

17 Interview with Davlat Khudonazarov in Washington, D.C., June 13, 1993.

18 For a comprehensive study of the role of political Islam in Tajikistan, see the paper by GERAL-KEITH MARTIN entitled "Islamic Political Movements in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: Toward Renaissance or Revolution?" Presented at the conference "Democratization in Central Asia," University of Wisconsin, Madison, April 16, 1993. Also Bess Brown, "The Islamic Renaissance Party in Central Asia," *Report on the USSR*, May 10, 1991.

19 See *Jumhuriat, Sadoi Mardum, Tojikistoni Sovieti* since late August 1991.

20 New Year's address by Rahmonov on Tajik Radio, December 31, 1992, translated in BBC, *Summary of World Reports*, SU /1578/B/1.

21 Interview with Yakub Salimov, Minister of Interior Affairs, in *Komersant*, December 16, 1992. This point of view is also echoed, albeit with caution, in Washington: Kenneth Katzman writes, "The civil war also involves outside powers, with Iran and Afghanistan said to be aiding the Islamic fundamentalists.... The United States is concerned about...the opportunity for increased Iranian influence in Central Asia." in *CRS Report for Congress*, March 10, 1993, p. 1.

22 *Tehran Times*, January 9, 1993. Also Islamic Republic News Agency, January 10, 1993 as translated by BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts*, January 11, 1993.

23 Alireza Sheikh Attar, "Siosati Khoriji Iran dar Muridi Ossioi Markazi va Ghafghoz" (Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Central Asia and the Caucasuses), *Keyhan*, no. 14435, March 3, 1992, p. 6.



Furthermore, both Iran and the Qozi knew that conditions in Tajikistan were unfavorable for the establishment of an Islamic state. The Qozi would point out that, despite his wishes, it would take 30 to 40 years to teach Tajiks the abc's of Islam.<sup>25</sup> Tajikistan would not have become an Islamic republic for the following additional reasons: those who vocally advocated an Islamic state were few in number and were concentrated in small and dispersed districts. In contrast, those who would have objected were many: the large "Russian-speaking population" including the Russians and the 30 percent Uzbek population, the entire northern province of Leninobod, the majority of women scared by the prospects of a return to the veil (Farangi) and the Badakhshoni people who, being Shiites, would not have accepted domination by a Sunni state.

In its program, the Islamic Revivalist Party (IRP) of Tajikistan, which had once been a regional affiliate of the Islamic Party of the Soviet Union, sought the establishment of an Islamic state, but only after Muslims had been prepared sufficiently to accept one.<sup>26</sup> Almost all of its leadership was drawn from poorly-educated villagers who did not have higher education, its members mostly unemployed youth and rural old men. Only a handful of the leadership had any formal religious education, the rest were primarily self-styled Imams of local mosques.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the IRP did not possess sufficient political force to act alone in the events leading up to the civil war. It therefore relied heavily on the cooperation of members of the La'le Badakhshon, many of which belonged to the Internal Ministry (MVD) and the police force. The Badakhshonis, being of Ismaili Shiite faith, would never join forces with IRP in establishing a Sunni Islamic state. In fact, the Islamic Revivalist Party received no more than eight to ten percent of the vote in the elections of 1991.<sup>28</sup>

In short, this generation of Tajiks, most of which does not know the principles of Islam, was not

prepared for an Islamic government. Nationalist writers who played an important role in reviving the Islamic aspects of Tajik/Persian culture stress that Islam is part of their national culture. The same writers who first published the Qoran and the Hadith are secular-minded, Moscow-educated intellectuals.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the experience of 70 years of ideological rule under the red banner might have discouraged those who would otherwise follow a green flag today.

But that is not to say that there are no prospects for Islamic extremism in Tajikistan. The danger does not loom from Iran, but from the tens of thousands of Tajik refugees who are now in Afghanistan, under the influence of other Islamic countries, some rich enough to buy loyalty. Mujaheddin groups are allegedly training the Tajiks in military camps.<sup>30</sup> The radicalization of political Islam in Tajikistan could actually emanate from the territory of Afghanistan.

## National Conflict

Whatever the initial causes, ultimately the conflict in Tajikistan has become a confrontation between national forces and anti-national ones.

Based on their published programs, opposition parties and people's associations all favored national independence in Tajikistan. Most apolitical intellectuals from the Writers' Union and the Academy of Sciences also stressed the creation of a national government as well as national cultural and linguistic revival.<sup>31</sup> But Tajik nationalism could not be fully implemented at this stage. The country had no trained politicians and diplomats: those who had finished the academy of diplomacy in Moscow were working outside the republic. In addition, due to the shortage of sufficiently trained local technical cadre, Tajikistan relied heavily on Russian specialists. The poor knowledge of Russian in vil-

24 Abass Maleki, "Ravobeti Iran va Jumhuriyoi Ossioyi Markazi," (The Relations of Iran and the Republics of Central Asia), *Central Asia and Caucasian Review*, Center of Central Asian Research (Tehran, Iran), vol. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 5-10.

25 Personal interview with the Qozi, September 17, 1992, office of the Qoziot, Dushanbe.

26 *Central Asian Monitor*, no. 2 (1993), p. 25.

27 From numerous personal interviews with members and leaders of the IRP, Dushanbe, Summer 1992.

28 *Central Asian Monitor* no. 5 (1992). See also similar arguments used by Jovid Muqim, "Tojikiston Jumhuri Islomi Meshavad?" (Will Tajikistan Become an Islamic Republic), *Tojikiston*, May 29, 1992, p. 3.

29 For example, Akbar Tursunov, who commissioned the publishing of the Qoran in translation in *Ilm va Haiiot*, vols. 6-9 (1990) and Gulrukhshor, editor of *Farhang* magazine, who published the *Masnavi* and *Lives of Prophets*, are "nationalist" intellectuals, former members of the Communist Party. The same can be said for editors of *Haft Ganj*, *Somon*, *Adabiiot va San'at*, which played a role in the national and religious revival in Tajikistan.

30 Steve LeVine, "Afghans Fuel War on Ex-Soviet Territory," *Financial Times*, May 12, 1993.

31 Adash Istad, "Davlati Milli" (A National Government), *Adabiiot va San'at*, no. 21, May 21, 1992, pp. 6-7. Also the series of articles by Muhammadjon Shukurov in the same newspaper, June-July 1992.



lages further limited the advancement of many Tajiks in higher education and industrial jobs.

Thus, a potential national government would face problems from the interior as well as from the exterior. It is likely that Russia and Uzbekistan will play an increasingly large role in the future developments in Tajikistan. The experiment of independence was doomed from the beginning, because: (1) the inheritor of the Soviet Union, Russia, acting primarily through its army, proved in fact reluctant to lose Tajikistan as a source of raw material and as an important geo-strategic position; (2) Uzbekistan took advantage of the internal conflict to revive its historical aim to dominate the Tajiks of Central Asia.

## Political, Economic and Military Dependence on Russia

A large segment of the Tajik economy continues to depend on Moscow, without whose cooperation industry can barely function. Eighty-five percent of Tajiks work in the agrarian field, while industrial workers were either brought from elsewhere or were trained from among the Russian population in Tajikistan. Most of the major factories continue to be operated by Russian personnel and produce mainly for the consumption of Russia. Aluminum, uranium, metalworking and chemical factories, the main industries operating in Tajikistan, are closely tied to military production for the Soviet and now Russian Army. Since Russia is the only major investor, the production, to a large degree, belongs to Russia.

Moscow needed Tajikistan as a source of natural resources and as a "gateway to the East," from which, according to the propaganda of the thirties, the Bolshevik revolution could be exported to Iran and Afghanistan. To this end, the borders of Tajikistan are geo-strategically important to Russia and to the CIS. Today, instead of a gate for exporting the Bolshevik revolution, the borders prevent the importing of Islamic revolutions from Afghanistan and Iran. Therefore, the presence of the Russian Army on the borders provides an opportunity for Russia to conduct its foreign policy both in Afghanistan and China, as well as play an important role in

future developments in the Central Asian countries.<sup>32</sup> The involvement of Russian troops in the internal problems and local conflicts of independent states which are located on the border could be an extension of the Russian foreign policy of control of outer borders. The bilateral agreement signed between Russia and Tajikistan in mid-May 1993 gives Russia an even freer hand within the territory of Tajikistan.

In addition to forces guarding the borders, Russia has more troops in Tajikistan. The 201st Motor Rifle division of the former Russian Army was stationed in Tajikistan first as a left-over of the Soviet Army to ensure the safety of the Russian population, then as a guard to major economic installations, and finally as a peace-keeping force suspected of participation in the war on behalf of the government. The army was accused by the opposition of violating its neutrality and interfering in the internal affairs of Tajikistan by providing pro-Nabiev forces with weapons and military equipment.<sup>33</sup> Whether the accusation was sustained or not, the division's mere presence in the midst of the fighting did provide both sides an opportunity to buy, steal or simply take otherwise unavailable equipment of modern warfare: Kalashnikov rifles, armored vehicles and even tanks.

Meanwhile, as long as the Russian population remains in Tajikistan, the Russian Army will stay to protect them. Since 1989, as many as 100,000 Russians and Russian-speaking citizens have left Tajikistan as a result of the increase in anti-Russian feeling.<sup>34</sup> But many, an estimated 200,000, lack the means to arrange transportation or buy housing in Russia and have stayed behind. Because the exodus of the Russians is proving devastating for the Tajik economy, the government is seeking to enact legislation to ease life for Russians in the republic, including re-establishing Russian as the state language of Tajikistan.

The presence of such an active Russian personnel in the industry, the dependence of the economy on Russia, and placing matters of internal security in the hands of the Russian Army open the way for interference of the Russian Federation in domestic policy-making. The government of Russia seems to support only those forces in Tajikistan which will defend the national interests of Russia, be they

32 Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev stressed the importance of Tajik borders for Russia's foreign policy during his visit to Dushanbe in early April 1993.

33 An accusation which was also confirmed by independent observers. See *Central Asian Monitor*, no. 5 (1982), p. 7.

34 Natalya Pachegina, "Oni byrvalis' iz 'raya,'" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 13, 1993.



democratic, conservative/communist, or even Islamic. Russia would not conceivably support any forces that would declare as national the resources and borders of Tajikistan. But Russia must also stand by its promise of democratic reform, a sentiment echoed by Yelena Bonner who wrote in *Izvestiya*: "We human rights defenders and Russia, which proclaims itself a state embarking upon the road to democracy, must reassess our attitude toward Tajikistan."<sup>35</sup>

## Independence and the Question of Uzbekistan

The conflict in Tajikistan also proved to be a victory for the Uzbek government, whose dominant role in the foundation of a regional power out of the "States of Central Asia" and its creeping Pan-Turkist insinuations will no longer be challenged by the Persian speakers of Central Asia.

While historically and ethnographically, these two ethnic groups in Central Asia may in fact have created a cultural symbiosis, the differences between Uzbeks, looking toward the "Turkish model," and Tajiks, rediscovering "Mother Iran," had become an absolute political cause for the intelligentsia.

Each group has tried to deny the existence of the other: In the twenties and thirties, Uzbek intellectuals decried the creation of a separate Tajik state within the republic of Uzbekistan.<sup>36</sup> Today, Tajik thinkers see the strengthening of a Tajik sense of identity in opposing Pan-Turkism.<sup>37</sup> The Uzbeks, according to the revival themes of the Persian civilization, are Turkicized Iranians.<sup>38</sup>

The Uzbek government, meanwhile, used the excuse of the conflict in Tajikistan to crush its own opposition: the Uzbek nationalist and reformist movements, Birlík and Erk, have recently joined the

Islamic Revivalist Party of Uzbekistan as banned organizations, and their leaders have been imprisoned,<sup>39</sup> some even dismissed from their university posts in "connection with the complication of the situation in Tajikistan."<sup>40</sup>

A number of facts point to the interference of the ethnic Uzbek element in the civil war in Tajikistan. The Popular Front that paved the way militarily for the new conservative government in Dushanbe and carried out most of the political killings, was created in the Uzbek town of Termez and was accused by the opposition of receiving military assistance from the Defense Ministry of Uzbekistan.<sup>41</sup> Eyewitnesses, including foreign correspondents, reported seeing Uzbek militiamen during the first invasion of Dushanbe by Communist forces in late October 1992. Many of the current high-ranking officials in Tajikistan are ethnic Uzbeks living in Tajikistan, while the minister of defense is a Russian who served in Uzbekistan. And finally, there is evidence that airplanes of the Uzbek Air Force were involved in the bombing of villages where the Tajik opposition was said to be hiding.<sup>42</sup>

Uzbek President Islam Karimov has declared himself ready to defend the "lawfully-elected government of Tajikistan."<sup>43</sup> The humanitarian assistance of Uzbekistan, however, could also be perceived as a front for that country's self-interest. The Tajiks are the only non-Turkic peoples of Central Asia and would oppose the revival of a "Turkistan" or a "greater Uzbekistan" as some scholars have called Karimov's personal ambition.<sup>44</sup> Turkistan associations operating outside the country, however, believe that the situation in Tajikistan will prevent or postpone the creation of a strong "Unified Turkistan," arguing that the Tajik fears of forced assimilation with Turkic peoples are ill-founded.<sup>45</sup>

Karimov wants to ensure the future independence and the powerful status of his country.

35 Yelena Bonner, "Communist Legacy Led to Civil War in Tajikistan," *Izvestiya*, no. 8, January 15, 1993, p. 8.

36 Writings of Braginski and Gaffurov as discussed in Rakowska Harmstone, pp. 240-41.

37 Muriel Atkins, "Religious, National, and Other Identities in Central Asia," in Jo-Ann Gross, *Muslims in Central Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 50-53. See also Akbar Tursunov, *Ehioi Ajam* (The Ajam Renaissance) (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1990).

38 For a revision of the Bolshevik Pan-Turkic policies during the national delimitations of 1924-29 from the point of view of a Tajik historian, see Rahim Massov, *Istoriya topornogo razdeleniya* (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1991).

39 Statement of Abdumannob Pulatov, Chairman, Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe's Hearing on the Situation in Central Asia, March 25, 1993. Also see Erika Dailey, *Human Rights in Uzbekistan*, Helsinki Watch Report, May 1993.

40 Igor Rotar, "Vlasti provotsiruyut tadhzhikskii variant," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 12, 1993, p. 3.

41 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 16, 1992, pp. 1, 3.

42 Oleg Panfilov, "Uzbekskaia aviatsiia bombit tadhzhikskuyu oppozitsiyu," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 23, 1993, p. 3.

43 L. Levin, "Islam Karimov: Tol'ko sil'noye gosudarstvo sposobno zashchitit' svoikh grazhdan!" *Narodnoye Slovo*, no. 45, March 5, 1993.

44 Olivier Roy's presentation at U.S. Institute of Peace, February 24, 1993. For Pan-Turkic ambitions in the region, see Aron Atabek, "Great Turkistan: Islam Turkism and Democracy," *Hag*, November 1991, no. 1, pp. 1-2.

45 A. Ahat Andican, "Turkistan: Utopia or Reality?" *Umid Hope*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1992), p. 29.



First of all, the conservative leadership of Uzbekistan would be threatened by the establishment of nationalist or democratic governments around its republic, capable of undermining its legitimacy. Second, Uzbekistan does not favor the creation of a strong national government in Tajikistan because of the potential for border conflicts. Nationalists in Tajikistan claim that Samarqand and Bukhara are in fact ancient centers of Persian culture now located on Uzbek territory. A national government in Tajikistan could also press for greater cultural and national autonomy for Tajiks living in Uzbekistan. Third, the Uzbek government would like to present itself as the champion of the struggle against "Islamic fundamentalism" in Central Asia and gain favor with the West.<sup>46</sup> Fourth, according to one far-fetched theory put forth by a Russian orientalist, Radii Fish, Karimov would like to gain access to the uranium of Tajikistan and become the Saddam Hussein of Central Asia.<sup>47</sup>

For now, Uzbekistan and Russia are cooperating in safeguarding the southern borders of Tajikistan. Karimov has sent Uzbek forces to the southern borders of the CIS, thus guaranteeing his influence in the future. He further closed the border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and appealed to the United Nations to help secure the Afghan-Tajik border, across which there could be a "direct encroachment to the sovereignty of all states of Central Asia."<sup>48</sup>

In the future, however, there is a strong possibility that what brought Russia and Uzbekistan together could also cause rivalry as both countries vie for influence in Central Asia.

## Conclusion

The socialist past played a crucial role in the escalation of the conflict in Tajikistan. Because of the colonial structure implemented during 70 years of Russian rule, the Tajiks cannot count on more than nominal independence for the near future. Nationalist factions, joining forces with groups of other dissatisfied people from the rural and religious sec-

tors of the population, fought for change but were prevented from achieving it by inexperience and a system that was doomed to dependence.

Post-Soviet Tajikistan inherited the status of the poorest country of the former Soviet Union. Low standards of living of the mostly agrarian people, on the one hand, and backwardness of the educational system, on the other, were especially characteristic of Tajik society. The leaders were mostly chosen from one region and did not share their power: when it came to choosing between the independence of Tajikistan or maintaining power, they opted for the status quo. They continue to talk about the unreadiness of the republic to accept independence and their attachments to Russia and Uzbekistan. President Rahmonov announced that "if it weren't for Russia and Uzbekistan... Tajikistan as a state would have ceased to exist by now."<sup>49</sup>

Nationalist forces, meanwhile, maintain that a strong national government should have taken advantage of the first few months of euphoria following the August 1991 coup and declared all resources located on their territory to be national property, including factories and the remnants of the Soviet Army.<sup>50</sup> In most other Central Asian republics, in either presidential or parliamentary elections that took place after the coup, some of the nationalist forces gained power. In Tajikistan, however, the Communist parliament was already elected before the coup, and the leadership, given the internal limitations of resources, was unable to grasp the significance of independence. "This is the region where the perils of independence are the greatest, particularly for the elites in the area," says Robert Legvold, who describes these states as "the involuntarily independent" republics.<sup>51</sup>

Although the old order seems to bring stability to the region, it does so at the expense of democratic reforms and basic human rights. Change and stability are increasingly incompatible concepts, both in Central Asian and former Soviet history.

Finally, if a Russian and Uzbek backed government in Tajikistan continues to exert pressure on nationalist and democratic opposition forces, those

46 Karimov instead stresses the humanitarian spirituality ("dukhovnost") of his people, in I. A. Karimov, *Uzbekistan: Svoi put' obnoveniya i progressa* (Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 1992), pp. 60-71.

47 Interview published in *Ekspress Khronika*, no. 11, March 8-15, 1993, p. 3.

48 See Islam Karimov's undated letter to Boutros-Boutros Ghali in the press release provided by the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations.

49 Rahmonov in Moscow, May 25, 1993, reported by Reuters.

50 Opinion expressed in interviews with Dust Muhammad Dust, Safar Abdulloh, Tohir Abdujabbor and Bahmanior in Dushanbe, June-October 1992.

51 Robert Legvold, "The Foreign Policies of the Post-Soviet States," *At the Harriman Institute*, vol. 6, no. 4.



who hold more extremist Islamic views could gain strength and flourish. The real peril of Islamic extremism and instability in the region may actually result from the misguided opinions and policies of the democratic world. Should real ethnic and religious conflicts erupt in Central Asia, the Russian Army could step in as the peace-keeping force. Then, the history of the annexation of the South by

a stubborn and power hungry Imperial Army might be repeated.

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*Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Ph.D. candidate in Central Asian Studies, Middle East Languages and Cultures, and The Harriman Institute (Columbia University), recently spent eight months in Tajikistan as an IREX nominee.*

*Note on Transliteration:*

A first step toward bypassing the adoption of Russian rules and regulations when studying Central Asia is to recognize their autonomous spelling systems. I believe that a new system of transliteration of Tajik words should be universally adopted, where the spelling of personal names and locations would be transliterated directly from the Tajik (using the Cyrillic alphabet currently used in the Academy of Sciences and in the media) into English, instead of translating from the Russian. I have used the Library of Congress table of transliteration from Tajik into English combined with the chart provided by Edward Allworth in his *Nationalities of the Soviet East* (New York: Columbia University, 1971) without the use of diacritic. –S.T.







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